

Personal Reflections on the Songs of Army Aviators in the Vietnam War¹

LtC Martin Heuer, Ret.

Army Aviation is a relatively new element of the United States Army in spite of the fact that the Army has had aircraft since the Wright Brothers. Army pilots flew observation aircraft in World War I and then became the Army Air Corps, flying all types of aircraft, from observation to fighters to B-29s, in World War II. Throughout this forty-year period, the pilots and crew members developed a rich tradition of being an elite group among their Army brethren, set apart by their skills and risk taking, and, eventually, even their uniforms. A pilot-- whether in the seat of a biplane with his white scarf streaming behind him as he dropped bombs on the enemy by hand, or in the lead B-29 in a flight of fifty on a bomb run that could devastate a whole city--was on the top of the list of elite forces. Just ask any pilot.

While all the ground forces often sang and marched to songs written by civilians, the Army Air Corps wrote their own songs and then sang them over and over in their clubs after and between missions. Writing and singing songs in the Army Air Corps was not a product of their status as an elite unit; the songs came from the idle, lonely hours in a relatively safe, secure environment, well behind the lines where the horrors, dangers and fears from the last mission, and the certainty of the next mission, which could be the last, were being washed away often with the aid of some alcoholic beverage. Not all pilots or crewmembers participated in these celebrations. There was only a handful of pilots who wrote songs or even played a musical instrument, but they were the ones who provided the music and entertainment while others listened and applauded, even though they might have heard the songs countless times before.

The songs that were created by the early pilots have endured because they relate aviation history in a special way. A songwriter, like a poet, must tell a story, whether sad or humorous, in no more than five minutes. These songs, written by the combatants as the events of the war unfolded, became the mortar for the blocks of morale and esprit de corps of a unit, or even of the whole Army. If you really want to know how the individual warrior felt about any war--or any part of it--read or sing their songs and you will probably experience every emotion they did, good and bad.

In 1947, after World War II, the Army Air Corps was re-designated the United States Air Force. They even got a new blue uniform. They adopted and adapted the traditions of the elite Army force they'd once been, including the songs. The Army, however, was not to be denied, even though the only airplanes it had left were a few very light observation, fabric covered aircraft, and some primitive, experimental autogyros called helicopters, which looked at the time like something constructed from a Tinker Toy box. The Army started over with only a few hundred pilots, while the Air Force, with its new jet fighters, continued their proud traditions, creating commands called TAC, MAC and SAC. (Tactical Air Command, Military Airlift Command and Strategic Air Command).

The Korean War, and the further development of the helicopter, gave Army pilots a new life and mission. Helicopters were used for evacuation of

wounded but there were very few aviation units on which traditions could be built. Army pilots did some singing in Korea but most songs were stolen from the old Air Corps and many of these were of World War II vintage

In the 1950s, the United States Army's fledgling aviation effort became known as Army Aviation complete with the motto "Above the Best." Army Aviation continued to grow and reorganize throughout the late 50s and early 60s, forming aviation companies that had both light, fixed wing aircraft and helicopters. Pilots began wearing flight suits, jackets, and even flight helmets. Although the flight uniforms all came from Air Force depots, they, nevertheless, wore them with pride. Army aviators felt closer to their Air Force brothers than to those in other Army specialties; ground officers and commanders who often resented those who wore flight clothing, made more pay, and were, generally, a more boisterous bunch. But Vietnam would soon change all of this.

Starting in 1961, U.S. Army Aviation companies and Special Forces units were among the first to arrive in South Vietnam. The Army Aviation companies were usually billeted in larger city strongholds for the security of both aircraft and personnel. Their encampments were typically surrounded by concertina wire, trip flares, mines, sand bagged bunkers that offered some protection from the enemy but not from the loneliness. Few Americans stateside even knew these aviation companies were in Vietnam. Isolated and lonely, these encampments offered an environment conducive to the creation of songs. Those aviators who could play an instrument, usually a guitar, procured one locally and began entertaining themselves and their hootch mates. It wasn't long before these entertainers composed songs of their own. Rewording some from previous wars and conflicts, they began to sing for the amusement of larger groups in the officers, noncommissioned officers, and enlisted men's clubs. Every unit had one of each of these clubs because the Vietnamese bars were generally off-limits, especially after sunset.

These early Army Aviation songs were set to well-known tunes of the period like "Davy Crockett," "Five Hundred Miles," "Take These Chains From My Heart," and "Red River Valley" and "Old Shep" from an earlier time. Others were reworded Oscar Brand songs like his "Fighter Pilot's Lament," now renamed "Shawnee Pilot's Lament" in reference to the tandem rotor helicopter that looked like a grasshopper and was often referred to as the "Flying Banana." Those who flew it called it other names which, of course, they put in the song. Another remake of Brand's "Lament" was titled "South of the Mekong." Most of these early Vietnam Army Aviation songs were about the environment in this new war. They wrote and sang about the aircraft that were clearly not suited for the mission; the general lack of enthusiasm for the war for which they did not yet even receive combat pay; the people, culture and soldiers of South Vietnam; their leaders and—whorehouses. These songs expressed a certain bitterness about the fact that the Americans were in a camp surrounded by barbed wire, and that outside, the Vietnamese could not be identified as friend or foe. Many of the songs were X-rated and rarely see the light of day today. But it is difficult to deny their existence and their message.

Sergeant Barry Sadler, a Special Forces soldier wrote his song, "Ballad of the Green Beret," during this period. It became a popular song in the United States, but in Vietnam, an unidentified Army aviator grabbed it like a hot grenade, changed the words, retitled it "Green Flight Pay," and tossed it back to the Special Forces. Needless to say, there was an explosion of resentment from Special Forces when they heard the Army Aviation version which goes like this:

>Silver wings upon my chest

I fly my chopper above the best
I can make more dough that way
But I can't wear no Green Beret.

and ends with:

And when my little boy is old
His silver wings all lined with gold
He then will wear a Green Beret
In the big parade on St. Patrick's Day.

I suppose you could say that Army Aviation resented the elite Special Forces, who were getting all the glory in Vietnam at the time, and chose this opportunity to bring them down a notch or two. I personally know of an officer who prohibited the singing of this song in his club in Saigon. He was not an Army aviator.

The war escalated, and Army Aviation grew rapidly. In late 1965, the 1st Cavalry Division left Fort. Benning, Georgia and sailed to Vietnam with hundreds of helicopters and thousands of soldiers ready to test the new airmobile concept. At the same time, aviators and crew members were gathered from all over the world and brought to Fort. Benning to form helicopter companies. These aviation companies were not "ordinary" in any sense. They were now flying the Huey, the first jet-powered helicopter, loved by all who flew them. The aviators were older and many had thousands of hours of flight time. There were 38 majors in the 174th Aviation Company (Airmobile) (Light), the unit to which I was assigned, when only one--the commanding officer--was supposed to be there. Nothing at the time was normal.

What would possess an Army aviator to take a guitar to combat? At best, he could expect to live in a small tent, and move frequently. Love of music and a desire to ease loneliness induced me to pack along a handmade Peruvian guitar. When we assembled in the late evening for departure from Ft. Benning to Oakland, CA I discovered that Jack Westlake, another aviator in the unit, also had his guitar with him and a friendship began.

In the early years, Army Aviation units went to Vietnam by ship. The 174th and 175th boarded the USNS Upshur and sailed from Oakland in late February '66. The voyage was typical--twenty-one days in cramped quarters with nothing to do. I was happy to have my guitar. Jack Westlake and I spent hours playing and singing and were joined by Scat McNatt, Jack's boss. With three part harmonies set to Peter, Paul and Mary songs and some calypso music then popular, the days passed more quickly. Our trio was asked to provide musical entertainment for the initiation ceremonies on crossing the International Dateline, and we sang at breakfast in the ship's mess as well as for the enlisted men in their severely cramped quarters below deck. Scat and I were majors, and Jack was a captain. We called ourselves "The High Priced Help."²

Arriving at Qui Nhon, we disembarked by climbing down the side of the ship on rope ladders to the bobbing landing craft waiting below, just like in those World War II movies. I haven't stopped thinking about how abnormal this all was. Here I was, going into the combat zone with a camera slung around my neck, a .45 caliber pistol in a shoulder holster without a single round of ammunition--and a guitar.

The 48th Assault Helicopter Company's third platoon, who called themselves "Guts and Guns," wrote a song they called "The 48th" about their formation at Fort. Benning and their early days in Vietnam. The words expressed pride and esprit de corps in the accomplishments of the company even though the unit had picked up, lock, stock, and helicopter, and moved six times.

In the early months of 1966, General George P. Seneff was selected to form the 1st Aviation Brigade in Saigon. It was probably the largest single brigade the Army has ever assembled. Each month, all unit commanders of the brigade, from battalion level and above, met with the brigade commander at various locations throughout the southern half of Vietnam. Musical talents became apparent during the early stages of the brigade formation. The word got around about the singing and entertaining that had already begun in the aviation units in the field. To enhance morale, General Seneff and his staff decided to recognize the musicians at his commanders' conferences by creating a song/ballad contest. At the end of the one day meeting, usually a Saturday, a song contest was held in the dining facility, or in the host units' officers club following the evening meal. The first contest was held at the Red Bull Inn, the 1st Aviation Brigade officers' club, in Saigon in June 1966.

General Seneff encouraged the unit commanders to challenge the musically talented soldiers in their units to enter the monthly contest. There were many individuals and groups who were already providing entertainment in their units, so the contest became the catalyst for the creation of original songs and provided the forum for them to be heard and recorded. The only rule of the contest was that the words to the song be original; and if the music was original also, that was all well and good, but it wasn't necessary. Many of the contest songs were recognizable melodies, but the words were changed to tell a story about an individual, a unit, an aircraft, a combat assault, the enemy, or just about anything in Vietnam that triggered the composer's imagination. The talents of these ordinary, everyday soldiers were truly amazing. The contests produced some great songs about Army Aviation, and many of them were new, not merely word changes to songs sung in previous wars. Because of the availability of reel to reel audio recorders, the contests were recorded live. We have found the tapes for six contests but are still searching for at least eight more.

The participants were soloists, duos, trios, quartets, quintets, and sextets. Their instruments included guitars of many varieties, mandolins, banjos, violins, ukuleles, bongo, and snare drums, and in one case, a complete drum set. Many of these, usually the string instruments, were brought to Vietnam by their owners. The others were ordered from Thailand and Japan, but some guitars were purchased in Vietnam, and those who used them complained constantly that they could not be tuned nor would they stay in tune.

The names of the groups were usually a take off on the unit call sign. The 173rd call sign was "Robin Hood," so the group called themselves "The Merry-men." The 48th was "Blue Star," and the singers were "The Blue Stars." The 117th were the "Beach Bums" and the 170th "The Buccaneers." The 282nd trio was the "Black Cats" or sometimes the "Hepcats." Our trio in the 174th grew to a quartet when Captain Chinch Wollerton joined the unit. Jack had been promoted to major so, with three majors and a captain, we called ourselves "Three Majors and a Minor." Chinch was promoted to major shortly thereafter and we reverted to our original name of "The High Priced Help." The 179th Assault Support Helicopter Company quartet called themselves "The Nads," and every time they got on stage to sing, their audience could cheer them on by yelling, "Go Nads, Go Nads!" The largest of all the groups was a complete band, including the commanding officer of the 57th Aviation Company and featuring a fine ukulele player; they had dubbed themselves "Pineapple Joe and his Lakanukies," a name embedded, too, with it's own double meaning.

The songs covered a wide spectrum of daily events in the life of Army aviation personnel, and the majority were in a humorous "tongue in cheek" vein. One titled "Aviation Medicine" was written by Chief Warrant Officer

Leonard Eugene Easley of the 282nd Assault Helicopter Company, Black Cats, who flew out of Da Nang in northern Vietnam. Gene's song, to the tune "I've Had It," is a spoof about the trials of a flight surgeon treating aviation personnel of all ranks for an unnamed social disease. The Doc treats a specialist fourth class, a lieutenant, a major, and finally a general, who of course was General Seneff, the brigade commander. The last verse goes like this:

Well, General Seneff, if you're willin',
Let's bomb this place with penicillin,
Or we'll get it, ya ya, we'll get it.

and naturally, some did.

"Six Days in The Jungle" tells the story of a typical four man helicopter crew shot down only to survive for six days. Major Austin of the 222nd Combat Aviation Battalion wrote the song to the tune "Six Days on The Road." The song provides the details of the crash and the crew's encounter with Viet Cong troops, all of this in surreal exaggerated terms. The last verse finds the crew still in the jungle with nothing but hope. It ends:

Well the crew chief and the gunner, they have eaten up all of my C's,
And the AC keeps a-mumblin' and a-crawling around on his knees.
I don't think things are going my way; I had a booking made on blue
ball today.
Six days in the jungle and they gotta pick me up tonight.

The reference to "blue ball" was to one of the charter aircraft that took the troops on Rest and Recreation (R and R) leaves of five day duration in spots like Japan, Hong Kong, Kuala Lumpur, Australia, Thailand, the Philippines, and Hawaii.

The 174th's The High Priced Help wrote a song to the tune "The MTA" about their battalion commander. His name was Samuel P. Kalagian, and he was of Armenian descent with a dark swarthy look which resulted in the nickname "Black Sam." The 14th Combat Aviation Battalion was given the call sign "Arab" in his honor. He had thousands of flight hours and had been a P-51 fighter pilot in World War II. The song, titled "Black Sam" is a story of Colonel Black Sam Kalagian as he led the yet untested units of his battalion in their first combat assault under his command. The writers, of course, took great liberty with Black Sam's performance and the confusion that ensued, but this humorous song was mostly the truth about a new unit's introduction to combat. This song was introduced at the song contest held in Vung Tau on 24 September '66 and was the winner.

The 173rd's Merryman in their Kingston Trio style, sang a great version of "Green Flight Pay." They also wrote a song about the young ladies of Saigon to the tune "New York Girls" which they titled "Saigon Girls," but it was also known as "Chu Yen." It is a story about an older army pilot who goes to Saigon for a three-day R and R and finds out that Miss Chu Yen could do a lot of things, but she couldn't dance the polka. After waking with an aching head to find the lady gone, his pocket picked, and a picture of Ho Chi Minh on the wall, he decides that going to Saigon will test your morals, and he recommends the Red Cross recreation center where the "Doughnut Dollies" pass out cookies and Kool Aid and of course, can dance the polka. The Merryman introduced this song at the contest at Nha Trang on 13 August 1966 and won.

One song that was usually met with jeers and hisses as soon as the title was announced was written by Rick Kelly, a West Point captain from a family of West Pointers. He was one of the NADS of the 179th Assault Support Helicopter Company. The title was simply "The Letter," and the tune was an original by Kelly. The song takes the form of a letter from a pilot to

his wife who has been unfaithful during the year they have been separated. The pilot interrupts his letter to go fly a final mission which turns out to be his last on earth, but just before he dies, he tells his friend he forgives his wife. His friend finishes his letter for him with the pilot's final words. This was another way the constant threat of the time honored "Dear John" letter was handled. Kelly also wrote a song titled "Song Contest"-- all about a pilot who finally got to the contest, but his song was so bad it finished last and he was forever banned from the song contest. Rick's song, however, was good enough to win the Soc Trang contest on 15 April 1967.

The UH-1 Huey was the subject of many songs, and indicative of them was a song written by Captain Britt Knox of the 117th Assault Helicopter Company. Introduced at the commanders conference song contest at Soc Trang on 15 April 1967, it went by the title "Old Zero Six Nine" and incorporated the tune of "Strawberry Roan." Captain Knox changed the original story of a cowboy and a horse to an overconfident Army aviator who believed he could fly an old Huey that was known to have broken many good pilots. Needless to say, the chopper got the best of him, threw him out, and, by itself, landed back on the pad from where the ill-fated flight began. This song, like most, had a message for all "hot rock" pilots.

Captain Donald R. Kelsey and members of the 48th Assault Helicopter Company Blue Stars sang of the courage each crew member knew they would be asked to muster should they be shot down and captured in their song, "American Fighting Men." All military personnel of the U.S. Armed Forces are bound by a code of conduct that spells out very clearly how each individual must conduct himself once in the hands of the enemy. Personally, I am amazed this song was written, as it is not the kind of subject easily adapted to music. The code of conduct begins with the words "I am an American fighting man" and documents the deep commitment the writers felt to the code and to their fellow soldiers:

I'll not surrender of my own free will
I will stay and fight until
The last breath leaves my body cold still

This song is a clear example of the pride in unit and country voiced by units in Vietnam in the 1966 to 1967 period. Everyone thought we were there to win. As time passed and as the war ground on, that concept went to hell in a hand basket.

The pace of the war and the one-year limit on a tour of duty caused the Army to vastly increase the number of pilots to operate the thousands of helicopters now in Vietnam. New pilots arrived as individual replacements with only 100 hours of flight time, enough to make them dangerous, and they were dubbed "Peter Pilots." They were called that until they were qualified to become an aircraft commander. Ultimately, almost all of them became AC's as the rotation progressed. Captain Conroe of the 170th Assault Helicopter Company wrote a song about the typical Peter Pilot and introduced it at the song contest at Nha Trang on 13 August 1966. It starts out with Peter Pilot, fresh out of flight school all trim and neat, a guy whom the ladies call Pilot Pete, getting his orders for Vietnam. He arrives in Vietnam and quickly screws up everything he's asked to do, including his first combat assault. The song is not a malicious attack on new pilots, but nevertheless it sends the message that those without experience should heed the advice of more experienced pilots. The High Priced Help adopted this song and sang it nearly every time they performed.

Another great song was written by an as yet unidentified pilot of A Company, of the 501st Combat Aviation Battalion, later redesignated the 71st Assault Helicopter Company. Their call sign was "Rattlers," and they were based at Bien Hoa, which they called the Snake Pit. This fourteen-verse song tells in a humorous way how a poorly planned and executed

early evening company flight mission went awry. The company commander's aircraft had not been refueled. Can you imagine that? Forty miles northeast of the Snake Pit, his aircraft ran out of fuel and landed without damage in the darkness—an extraordinary happening in reality but one preserved in song. The unit's pilots and aircraft spent all night looking for their commander. The story continues with the commander stealing a Viet Cong bicycle and pedaling his way back to the Snake Pit. Certainly there is some truth in this song, but there is also a healthy dose of fiction. It was common to use a mistake or, more accurately, a dumb, stupid inexcusable error or omission as the subject for a song. Again, this practice sent a message, and every member of the unit loved to hear it over and over, including the person who made the mistake. There was one exception--a mistake that resulted in someone's death was never, to my knowledge, put to music.

The last of these example songs is one that helped make the Merry-men of the 173rd Assault Helicopter Company famous. The origin of this song is in dispute, but Some say it was written originally by Major John Tobias of A Company of the 501st. The Merry-men say they wrote at least some of it. The tune used was "Oleana." The Merry-men performed this song virtually every time they got up to sing either at Lai Khe, their home base, or elsewhere. The song, titled "Army Aviation," is a rousing rendition that touches on all the missions Army aviation performed in Vietnam. All pilots and crew members identified themselves with the song immediately, with those who knew the words usually singing along with the Merry-men. If you were an Army Aviation crew member in Vietnam, this was your song. It certainly was the Merry-men's, who always introduced it with these spoken words: "We, the Merry-men of the 173rd Assault Helicopter Company, dedicate this song to all the aviators who have gone before us and to those who will follow us into this conflict here in Vietnam." The first verse began,

Fly the jungle, fly the mountains,
Fly the whole of Vietnam.
Carry cargo, carry troopers,
Carry anything we can.

The song ended with a crescendo of the words "Army Aviation." It was a winner and a crowd-pleaser every time it was sung. Some even lobbied for the adoption of this song as the official song of Army Aviation, but it was too specific, including too many references to the Vietnam War. Army Aviation crew members who are veterans of this conflict certainly remember this song.

There are well over one hundred songs known positively to have been written and sung by Army Aviation pilots and crew members in Vietnam. Several more were written in other places, like Germany and the U.S., but were later sung in Vietnam. Kris Kristofferson, songwriter and singer, was an Army aviator who served in aviation units in the States and Germany but never served in Vietnam. He wrote two or three songs that were sung frequently. Although the specific actions, events or thoughts that inspired these songs may be known only to their composers, the emotions they embody helped all who listened pass their time incountry.

The song contests provided the impetus to write and record these songs of Army Aviation. Some of the song writers have said they were ordered to write a song for the contest by their commanders, who knew they had the talent but needed some gentle prodding to get it done. There would have been casual song fests in the hootches, clubs, and fire bases, but most would never have been recorded, even on paper, although a few units did publish song books and disseminated them by use of a stencil and now outmoded mimeograph machines. Army Aviation should be forever grateful to General Seneff, who recognized the value of this organized morale enhancing entertainment and the efforts of those talented enough to

accomplish the task. We should be thankful that Colonel John Marr, commanding officer of the 17th Combat Aviation Group, who preserved his copies of the reel to reel tapes for six of the contests and another tape with songs from other contests. Without these, much of the information about the songs would have been lost forever.

The song contests ended with the last one in September of 1967 when General Seneff departed. The next brigade commander canceled all further contests, and the creation of new or recorded songs by Army aviators and crew members declined dramatically. There may have been individuals and groups who continued to write and sing songs, but no record of such activity has yet been found. There is another reason for the decline – the introduction of paid entertainers in the form of rock bands made up of Filipino, Vietnamese, and other nationalities to provide the much needed diversion and entertainment.

None of the 2.6 million troops of all services who served in Vietnam went there to sing. Army flight crew members went to fly helicopters in combat, day and night, in good and bad weather. Of all the aviator singers who participated in the song contests, only CWO Gene Easely of the 282nd died as a result of combat. He was shot in the neck while flying a gunship in northern South Vietnam two months before he was due to return to the states. When General Seneff heard the news, he issued an order that all contest participants should not be permitted to fly combat missions as they were too valuable to unit morale. Needless to say, it was an order issued out of frustration and sorrow, so it was never really implemented. As a participant and now a collector of the songs of Army Aviation in Vietnam, it is clear to me there was a need for the relaxation and therapy provided by the music.

There were a few pilots and crew members who, for their own personal reasons, did not participate in sing-a-longs or other entertainment but the vast majority did. Many who couldn't carry a tune sang along anyway. Since returning from two tours in Vietnam I have spoken to hundreds of aviation personnel of all services. All of them recall the music with fond memories and are quick to add that without the singing and the good times, their tours would have seemed endless. Music can soothe the soul.

I salute all of the officers and enlisted men who gave so much of their own free time to create the songs way back then and who have contributed so much to the history and traditions of Army Aviation. It was an honor to have served with them.

Notes

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[2.](#) An excellent CD of Marty and the High Priced Help (recorded in Vietnam in 1966) is available from Border City Records via email at bordercityrecord@aol.com

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